

Malta: Hidden change?

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Introduction

On Saturday, May 24, the third European election since Malta joined the European Union (EU) was held. Malta elected six Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), one more than in 2009. The electoral system is the same as the one used in national elections, the major difference being that the 13 electoral districts are merged into one. It is a proportional system based on the single transferable vote (STV), which permits voters to enumerate as many preferences as the candidates listed on the ballot sheet (Katz, 1984).¹ The small dimension of districts,² the fact that the ‘extra’ votes obtained by party candidates are not transferred to a national pool, and acute bipartisanship have produced an almost perfect two-party system that, together with other features of the political system, makes Malta a textbook case of majoritarian democracy (Lijphart, 1999). No party apart from the two main ones—the *Partit Laburista* (PL) and the *Partit Nazzjonalista* (PN)—has ever obtained representation in the Maltese parliament since 1966, nor in the European Parliament (EP) since 2004, although the greens of *Alternattiva Demokratika* (AD) occasionally came close to the objective.

¹ If the candidate who got the first preference is elected, the vote is transferred to the candidate who was indicated as second preference, and so on until the vote is made ‘useful’, that is, it is assigned to a candidate who has not yet passed the election threshold.

² Malta has a population of approximately 420,000 inhabitants and an electorate of approximately 330,000 voters. For the national elections, the territory is divided in 13 districts, each one electing five MPs. To the total of 65 MPs, a number of seats is added to make reward the party that got more ‘first preferences’, and make sure that the majority of seats is actually conferred to the party that received more votes. Each district has an average of approximately 25,000 voters.

The election campaign

The EP election took place 14 months after the 2013 national elections, which confirmed alternation in the government following a long period of Nationalist rule. The NP was in government since 1987, except for the short-lived Labour government of 1996–'98. Preparations for the election campaign started in July 2013 with the opening of nominations for potential MEP candidates; the lists were closed on January 2014. Some controversial decisions taken became quite polemical during the campaign.³ The most controversial one was probably the PL's decision to present its former leader and one time prime minister, Dr. Alfred Sant, as a candidate.

Dr Sant led the party when it won the 1996 election but also when it lost those of 1998, 2003 and 2008. He had actively campaigned against Malta joining the EU and doggedly refused to recognise the result of the 2003 membership referendum. His candidature is illustrative of a certain ambiguity in the PL's EU position. The advent of a new leadership in 2008 shifted the party towards more pro-EU positions, which was part of a broader change in the party's political platform and a rapprochement with the EU that had started in 2004. Notwithstanding that many Labour supporters are critical of Sant's past European stance, he enjoys overwhelming support within the European Socialist family. Sant's popularity among Labour supporters and opinion polls constantly showed that he was likely to be elected first from among all the candidates, which was confirmed by the election results.

The short time span that separated the European election from the national election meant that political campaigning went on unabated for almost 14 months, punctuated only by short truces. This was one of the reasons why European issues had only intermittent relevance. In summer, the government's attempt to implement a pushback of migrants at sea was criticised by the Opposition. Following the harsh criticism of the European Commission, and the launch of *Mare Nostrum* by Italy, the pushback policy was eventually dropped. In a rather Orwellian fashion, the government claimed that it has threatened push back only to force the EU to 'smell the coffee'.

On November 2013, the opposition mounted a campaign against a 'citizenship scheme' launched by the government, which saw the sale of Maltese passports to affluent investors. The scheme was not stopped, but the polemics and, again, strong criticism by European institutions forced the government

³ The PN rejected the candidacy of a popular TV presenter in the light of a pending court case, whereas the PL approved a candidate who also had pending judicial issues, which later forced him to retire from the race, much to the embarrassment of his party.

to introduce major amendments on at least four occasions. The scheme was the *avant propos* of the main European campaign—whose pace really started picking up in April 2014.

With the intensification of the campaign and with the official opening two months before the elections, national issues regained full centrality. The PN openly and repeatedly appealed to voters to use their votes to show their disappointment with the way the prime minister was running the country. In turn, the PL responded with claims that it was keeping its electoral promises. The centrepiece of its campaign was the reduction of energy prices for households. Energy prices were one of the main issues on which the LP had won the 2013 national election, and the price reduction was timed to occur in March 2014 just before the start of the last phase of the electoral campaign.

Another relevant issue was the Civil Unions Bill approved on April 2014. This act permitted civil unions with same rights, responsibilities and obligations as marriage, including the right of joint adoption and recognition of foreign same sex marriage. The enactment of the law had been promised by both parties in their respective 2013 national electoral programmes, but the NP abstained on the bill because it included the right of adoption by gay couples. The NP abstention was not greeted well, neither by the LGBT community nor by a sizeable majority of the public.

In sum, the election campaign in Malta followed the script of second-order elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980), with national issues dominating and European themes confined to the periphery. The only ‘moments’ when ample space was afforded to European issues was when Martin Schultz and Jean Claude Juncker addressed meetings during their visits to Malta to campaign as the presidential candidates of their respective political groups, although the saliency of these events in comparison with the rest of the campaign was rather circumscribed.

However, to conclude that the EU was entirely absent from the electoral campaign would be misleading. The contested path towards EU membership, sanctioned by the 2003 referendum, left a deep footprint in party competition, and the ‘usage of the EU’ (Garcia, 2014) occasionally recurred in this campaign. Notwithstanding the pro-EU turn of the new PL leadership, the EU retained some relevance in electoral competition, though declined in domestic terms.

The results

Approximately 258,000 voters went to the polls, 74.8% of those entitled to vote. This is considered as a remarkable participation rate in the European context, but it is less so in the Maltese, one which is used to ‘near-universal

Table 1. Results of the 2014 European Parliament elections – Malta

Party	EP Group	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (change from 2009)	Seats (change from 2009)
Labour Party (PL)	S&D	53.4	3	-1.4	-1
Nationalist Party (PN)	EPP	40.0	3	-0.5	+1
Democratic Alternative (AD)	G-EFA	3.0	0	+0.6	0
Europe Empire (IE)	–	2.7	0	+1.2	0
Others	–	1.0		0	0
Total		100.0	6	100.0	0
Turnout (%)		74.8		-4	
Legal threshold for obtaining MEPs (%)		35.975 votes			

Note on the electoral system: the 'quota' for electing a candidate is based on the number of valid votes cast. The Droop Quota is used to establish the number of votes that candidates need to poll to secure a seat: $Q = ((\text{Valid votes}) / (\text{Total number of seats} + 1)) + 1$

*In the 2009 European election, Malta elected five MEPs, two PN e three PL. Following the entry into force of the protocol to the Lisbon Treaty on December 2011, a sixth seat was added, which was obtained by the PL. Since the sixth seat was attributed based on the results of the 2009 election, the table includes it in the comparison between the 2009 and the 2014 elections.

Abbreviations for EP groups: EPP, European People's Party; S&D, Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats; ALDE, Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe; G-EFA, The Greens–European Free Alliance; ECR, European Conservatives and Reformists; GUE-NGL, European United Left–Nordic Green Left; EFD, Europe of Freedom and Democracy; NI, Non-Inscrits.

turnout' (Hirczy, 1995). Turnout in the 2013 national elections was 93%, similar to that of 2008 but lower than the 96% of the 2003. This decline has raised some concern among several commentators. Even in comparison with the previous European elections, the four-point downturn was significant (for a discussion of past European elections, see Pace, 2005 and 2009).

Once again, the 2014 European election rewarded the PL. Running for the first time as the incumbent, it managed to gain 54.3% of 'first preferences'. This was 1.5 percentage points less than what it obtained in the 2009 EP elections and was similar to the result of the 2013 national elections.

With 40% of first preferences, the NP went 3.5 points below the 2013 national elections. The Nationalists replicated the performance of last EP elections - when, however, they were still in government. The gap between the two main parties enlarged from 11.5 to 13.4 percentage points.

The vote essentially consolidates the realignment of the Maltese electorate, as shown by the PL's progress in all the electoral districts, including the traditionally Nationalist ones. The PN's defeat, however, was alleviated by the effect of transfer of voting preferences among the candidates, which turned a remarkable deficit in first-count votes into a draw in terms of seats. Following the allocation of the first seats, which happened relatively quickly, it appeared certain that Labour would elect three seats and the Nationalists two, while the sixth one could go to either party. The complex transfer of voters' preferences completed four days after the election finally gave the seat to the NP with a meagre margin of 206 votes. For the first time, the NP had managed to win three seats at the EP.

The share of votes gained by the two main parties remains very large, amounting to 93.4% of suffrages and all seats. However, this share is significantly less than that of last year's national elections. The space left free by the PL and PN reserved some surprises. The greens of AD gained a half point on the last European election—and almost one point on the 2013 national elections. But with a total tally of 3%, they confirmed their inability to achieve parliamentary representation at both the domestic and the EU levels. Not surprisingly, given the swing to the right in the whole of Europe, it was the growth of the neofascist extreme right *Imperium Europa* (IE), which almost doubled its votes in comparison with the 2009 European elections with a jump from 1.5% to 2.7%, a result that is very close to AD's. In the context of Malta's bipolarism consolidated around PN-PL duopoly, AD is no longer the only outsider or 'third party'.

Conclusions

Apparently, the results of the European elections did not reserve any surprise. The six MEPs elected by Malta are equally divided by the two main parties, which once again gained the majority of votes and kept smaller parties away from parliamentary representation. However, traces of change loom behind the apparent stability.

The elections consolidate the realignment of voters along the main parties, deepening the Labour's hold on the country and extending it to traditionally Nationalist areas. Abstention increased, with turnout 20 points down from the recent national elections, 4 points below the last EP elections, and 8 points down from those held in 2004.

Because of the STV electoral system, the two main parties send three members each to the EP despite the large gap in votes that separates them. This confirms once again the disproportional effects of the system, with hardly predictable consequences (Doron, 1977). This time, the losers benefit.

A relevant change is the number of elected women, higher than men (4 vs. 2) despite that the STV has traditionally been considered to penalise them (Lane, 1995). Malta had not elected women to the EP until one year ago, when three women replaced the MEPs who resigned after being elected to the national parliament. The prevalence of women can be read against the context of the broader societal change of the last years, culminating in the 2011 divorce referendum and in the 2013 Civil Unions bill.

Although the success of the extreme-right Imperium Europa surprised observers, no explicitly Eurosceptic party elected members to the EP. In this respect, the Maltese vote departs from the outcome of the elections in most EU member countries, notably from those of the other southern member states, compared with which, however, Malta was only marginally touched by the economic crisis.⁴ However, to conclude from this that Euroscepticism is not represented might be misleading. Dr Alfred Sant may have gathered the EU-critical vote, which explains why he was the most voted candidate.

This outcome is indicative of the ability of the two main parties to represent a wide range of positions, thus neutralising the challenge of smaller parties. Yet the great success of the Eurosceptical candidate Alfred Sant may indicate the persistence of a considerable share of Eurosceptical voters, particularly among Labour supporters. So long as the EU leads to a clear positive sum game, it is highly probable that the main parties will manage to absorb and internalise opposition to the European project. However, an economic or political crisis could trigger latent tensions, and awaken the 'sleeping giant' (Van der Eijk and Franklin, 2004).

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⁴ The crisis brought an economic slowdown, but GDP growth turned negative only in 2009 and regained a sustained pace in the past two years, with positive projections for the next years. Unemployment remained relatively low, approximately 6.5%. The public debt is currently slightly above 70%, but the deficit is at 2.8% and is projected to contract to 2.5%. Last year's result was achieved at the expense of €370 million in national debt. Malta has been under the excessive deficit procedure since 2012, when it was given two years to put its finances back on to a sustainable path.

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